

# **Parable of the Prodigal Son**

## **As Seen Through Christianity and Buddhism**

Most of you know the Parable of the Prodigal Son as it appears in Luke's gospel, but probably few are aware that it has a Buddhist parallel in one of the major writings of Mahayana Buddhism. Although both parables seem to convey a similar message regarding God's compassion for humans, a closer look will reveal fundamental differences in their teaching and consequently, between Christianity and Buddhism. Let us quote both parables and then analyze them.

First, here is the text in the Gospel According to Luke:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there, squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." So he got up and went to his father. But after a while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son,

threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15:11-32)

The Buddhist parable is longer:

A young man left his father and ran away. For long he dwelt in other countries, for ten, or twenty, or fifty years. The older he grew, the needier he became. Wandering in all directions to seek clothing and food, he unexpectedly

approached his native country. The father had searched for his son all those years in vain and meanwhile had settled in a certain city. His home became very rich; his goods and treasures were fabulous.

At this time, the poor son, wandering through village after village and passing through countries and cities, at last reached the city where his father had settled. The father had always been thinking of his son, yet, although he had been parted from him over fifty years, he had never spoken of the matter to anyone. He only pondered over it within himself and cherished regret in his heart, saying, "Old and worn out I am. Although I own much wealth – gold, silver, and jewels, granaries and treasures overflowing – I have no son. Someday my end will come and my wealth will be scattered and lost, for I have no heir. If I could only get back my son and commit my wealth to him, how contented and happy would I be, with no further anxiety!"

Meanwhile the poor son, hired for wages here and there, unexpectedly arrived at his father's house. Standing by the gate, he saw from a distance his father seated on a lion-couch, his feet on a jeweled footstool, and with expensive strings of pearls adorning his body, revered and surrounded by priests, warriors, and citizens, attendants and young slaves waiting upon him right and left. The poor son, seeing his father having such great power, was seized with fear, regretting that he had come to this place. He reflected, "This must be a king, or someone of royal rank, it is impossible for me to be hired here. I had better go to some poor village in search of a job, where food and clothing are easier to get. If I stay here long, I may suffer oppression." Reflecting thus, he rushed away.

Meanwhile the rich elder on his lion-seat had recognized his son at first glance, and with great joy in his heart reflected, "Now I have someone to whom I may pass on my wealth. I have always been thinking of my son, with no means of seeing him, but suddenly he himself has come and my longing is satisfied. Though worn with years, I yearn for him."

Instantly he sent off his attendants to pursue the son quickly and fetch him back. Immediately the messengers hasten forth to seize him. The poor son, surprised and scared, loudly cried his complaint, "I have committed no offense against you, why should I be arrested?" The messengers all the more hastened to lay hold of him and brought him back. Following that, the poor son, thought that although he was innocent he would be imprisoned, and that now he would surely die. He became all the more terrified, fainted away and fell on the ground. The father, seeing this from a distance, sent word to the messengers, "I have no need for this man. Do not bring him by force. Sprinkle cold water on his face to restore him to consciousness and do not speak to him any further." Why? The father, knowing that his son's disposition was inferior, knowing that his own lordly position had caused distress to his son, yet convinced that he was his son, tactfully did not say to others, "This is my son."

A messenger said to the son, "I set you free, go wherever you will." The poor son was delighted, thus obtaining the unexpected release. He arose from the ground and went to a poor village in search of food and clothing. Then the elder, desiring to attract his son, set up a device. Secretly he sent two men, sorrowful and poor in appearance, saying, "Go and visit that place and gently say to the poor man, 'There is a place for you to work here. We will hire you for scavenging, and we both also will work along with you.'" Then the two messengers went in search of the poor son and, having found him, presented him the above proposal. The poor son, having received his wages in advance, joined them in removing a refuse heap.

His father, beholding the son, was struck with compassion for him. One day he saw at a distance, through the window, his son's figure, haggard and drawn, lean and sorrowful, filthy with dirt and dust. He took off his strings of jewels, his soft attire, and put on a coarse, torn, and dirty garment, smeared his body with dust, took a basket in his right hand, and with an appearance fear-inspiring said to the laborers, "Get on with your work, don't be lazy." By such

means he got near to his son, to whom he afterwards said, "Ay, my man, you stay and work here, do not leave again. I will increase your wages, give whatever you need, bowls, rice, wheat-flour, salt, vinegar, and so on. Have no hesitation; besides there is an old servant whom you can get if you need him. Be at ease in your mind; I am, as it were, your father; do not be worried again. Why? I am old and advanced in years, but you are young and vigorous; all the time you have been working, you have never been deceitful, lazy, angry, or grumbling. I have never seen you, like the other laborers, with such vices as these. From this time forth you will be as my own begotten son."

The elder gave him a new name and called him a son. But the poor son, although he rejoiced at this happening, still thought of himself as a humble hireling. For this reason, grew mutual confidence between the father and the son. He went in and out and at his father's for twenty years he continued to be employed in scavenging. After this period, there ease, though his abode was still in a small hut.

Then the father became ill and, knowing that he would die soon, said to the poor son, "Now I possess an abundance of gold, silver, and precious things, and my granaries and treasuries are full to overflowing. I want you to understand in detail the quantities of these things, and the amounts that should be received and given. This is my wish, and you must agree to it. Why? Because now we are of the same mind. Be increasingly careful so that there is no waste." The poor son accepted his instruction and commands, and became acquainted with all the goods. However, he still had no idea of expecting to inherit anything, his abode was still the original place, and he was still unable to abandon his sense of inferiority.

After a short time had again passed, the father noticed that his son's ideas had gradually been enlarged, his aspirations developed, and that he despised his previous state of mind. Seeing that his own end was approaching, he commanded his son to come, and gathered all his relatives, the kings, priests, warriors, and citizens. When they were all assembled, he addressed them saying, "Now, gentlemen, this

is my son, begotten by me. It is over fifty years since, from a certain city, he left me and ran away to endure loneliness and misery. His former name was so-and-so and my name was so-and-so. At that time in that city I sought him sorrowfully. Suddenly I met him in this place and regained him. This is really my son and I am really his father. Now all the wealth which I possess belongs entirely to my son, and all my previous disbursements and receipts are known by this son." When the poor son heard these words of his father, great was his joy at such unexpected news, and thus he thought, "Without any mind for, or effort on my part, these treasures now come to me."

World-honored One! The very rich elder is the Tathagata, and we are all as the Buddha's sons. The Buddha has always declared that we are his sons. But because of the three sufferings, in the midst of births-and-deaths we have borne all kinds of torments, being deluded and ignorant and enjoying our attachment to things of no value. Today the World-honored One has caused us to ponder over and remove the dirt of all diverting discussions of inferior things. In these we have hitherto been diligent to make progress and have got, as it were, a day's pay for our effort to reach nirvana. Obtaining this, we greatly rejoiced and were contented, saying to ourselves, "For our diligence and progress in the Buddha-law what we have received is ample". The Buddha, knowing that our minds delighted in inferior things, by his tactfulness taught according to our capacity, but still we did not perceive that we are really Buddha's sons. Therefore we say that though we had no mind to hope or expect it, yet now the Great Treasure of the King of the Law has of itself come to us, and such things that Buddha-sons should obtain, we have all obtained. (Saddharmapundarika Sutra 4)

## **The Parable in its Context**

In Luke, the parable reveals the nature of God in Christianity, His expectation that all sinners may return to a father-son relationship with Him. Jesus told this parable to a large public consisting of both "religious experts" of the day, the Pharisees, and the people most

despised by them, the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other outcasts (Luke 15,1-2). The Pharisees considered these "sinners" to be outside the acceptable boundary of God's kingdom and accused Jesus for enjoying their company. In contrast to their attitude, He told the previous two parables in the same chapter (The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin), in order to emphasize His initiative in seeking and saving such sinners. In response, they acknowledged their sinful life and came to Jesus for healing and forgiveness, while the Pharisees considered themselves good enough according to God's standards (see the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector – Luke 18:9-14). Thus the Parable of the Prodigal Son reveals both God's love for those who were ready to accept it (the prodigal son who returns to his father), and His rejection of the Pharisees' hypocrisy and self-centered righteousness (the older son in the parable). Although the contrast between the two sons is an important point in the parable, as the Buddhist parable speaks only of a prodigal son, the teaching about the older son in Luke will be ignored in this comparison.

The Buddhist parable is part of the famous Saddharmapundarika Sutra (also called the Lotus Sutra, composed at the end of the second century AD), which revealed the new teaching of Mahayana Buddhism regarding the bodhisattva beings. The discourse of the Buddha is said to have taken place in front of a very large public, consisting of arhats, nuns, bodhisattvas, gods, and other beings. His teaching was addressed to those who have reached the arhat stage of becoming and are supposed to advance further by becoming a bodhisattva. As the son in the parable shouldn't be satisfied by his lower status, the Buddhist disciples should also aspire to a higher position, that of becoming a bodhisattva. It will eventually be attained step-by-step after a long instructing and testing process.

## **The Characters**

In the gospel, the father represents God, the Ultimate Reality in Christianity, while the prodigal son is the one living in sin, who finally repents and returns to a fellowship relation

with God. In the Sutra, the father is Buddha (or more specifically, the Buddha nature – Dharmakaya), while the son is the one struggling to become an enlightened bodhisattva being.

## **The Son's Departure and Miserable Condition**

The prodigal son in Luke declares he has had enough of staying home in obedience to his father and wants to be on his own. He not only wants to leave home, but he even dares to claim his inheritance, the fortune he is supposed to get at his father's death. Such a demand is extremely outrageous, especially in the Middle Eastern context. However, instead of rebuking or even denouncing his son, the father grants his request.

Soon after this, the son left for a distant country and there he squandered his entire fortune in wild living. This probably was a quite new and interesting experience for him, but it brought him to bankruptcy. Now he had to find a job to make a living in that country and the best offer he had was to feed someone's pigs. In a Jewish context, the pigs are considered unclean animals, therefore being hired to feed them and even being hungry enough to long for their food illustrates the worst possible situation one can reach.

The spiritual meaning of the prodigal son's leaving his home is assimilated in Christianity with man's rebellion against God, his heavenly father. God does not oppose one's freedom of will in choosing how to live. As the son in the parable claimed his inheritance and then squandered it, humans use all that God has granted them (wealth, health, time, and relationships), not for serving Him in obedience, but against His will. This attitude is called sin, and brings humans to the lowest possible stage of decadence. Although living in sin is at first very attractive and pleasant, in the end it leads to destruction, both from an existential and a spiritual point of view.

Another important observation here is that although the father in the parable gave a large fortune to his son, he was still rich after the

son's departure. However, the father's only concern proved to be his son's personal safety and return to the family. His wealth plays no role for him. As the rich man in the parable didn't become poor by his son's departure, God does not lose anything by our decision to live in rebellion to Him. The only one who is losing everything is man. The prodigal son of the Buddhist Sutra leaves home without any fortune from his father. His departure looks more like running away in secrecy. He also becomes needier, but is still able to make a living. The father doesn't seem to have been rich at the moment of his son's departure. He rather became rich after this episode, in another city than the one in which he previously lived with his son. Therefore the son had no wealthy position to remember from home and to eventually return to. Even if he would have, the father had left it, so there was no place for him to return. Regarding the father's concern in this story, he seems more worried about having an heir than about making his son happy again.

The meaning of the son's wandering in the Buddhist tale is that there is no initial position to lose in one's spiritual becoming. As the son leaves his home poor and remains poor, humans have no other inheritance than karma, which makes them wander from one bad incarnation to another. The only truth that governs human existence is suffering and karma, which leads to an endless wandering in the world with no original position to return to. The only spiritual fulfillment is a permanent growth toward an impersonal liberation. This is the Buddhist treasure to be discovered by any cost.

## **The Way Back Home**

The prodigal son of the gospel finally "came to his senses" and acknowledged his dramatic condition. Ashamed, he planned to return to his father, confess his sin, and ask to be hired as a servant. This position, no matter how humiliating it could be in front of his brother and the other servants, was a much better choice than staying with the pigs.

The process of one's "coming to his senses" is called repentance in Christian theology. It involves acknowledging the bad condition of living in sin and making the decision to leave it.

\* The Buddhist prodigal son made no decision to return to his father. He continuously wandered from town to town until he unexpectedly arrived at his father's palace. The son didn't even recognize his father, whose situation had changed a lot since his departure. More than this, the father's wealth inspired fear in the son and made him try to run away again in order to not enter into more trouble. Eventually, at the father's command, the attendants seized him and brought him to the palace against his will.

The son's wandering in the world can be interpreted as the effect of karma and reincarnation in one's life. They constantly push man on the one-way of becoming. However, long the process of being reincarnated in different bodies may be, one has to finally reach liberation (that's why the attendants seize the son against his will). One constantly experiences suffering until he has to accept that the best solution for his life is nirvana. Although reaching the status of a bodhisattva (a being that helps other humans attain liberation) seems to confer a personal afterlife destiny, the ultimate stage of becoming is shunya, the void, where nothing personal can remain.

## **What Happens Back Home?**

According to Luke's parable, the father was waiting for his prodigal son. He probably knew that the son couldn't find true satisfaction in what the world had to offer him. Instead of punishing him for his foolish behavior, "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (v. 20). Instead of humiliating the son as a repayment for the shame he cast on his father at departure, the father humiliates himself by running to meet him. Such a behavior was totally undignified according to Jewish standards of the time. After the son recited half of his prepared speech,

acknowledging he was wrong, the father interrupted him and commanded the servants to bring him the best robe, put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. The fattened calf was slaughtered and a feast ordered to celebrate his return. All these symbols prove a 100% forgiveness and rehabilitation of the son to his prior status. The robe was a sign of great distinction, the ring the sign of authority, the sandals a luxury (only slaves were bare-footed), and the slaughter of the fattened calf the sign of a very important celebration in the family. Instead of becoming a hired servant as he hoped, the son was fully restored to the position he had abandoned long before. The Sutra presents in a whole different way the prodigal son's return home. The father unexpectedly recognized him standing at his gate and sent his attendants to seize him and compel him to come to the palace. The son didn't understand the situation and became terrified. The father initially treated him like a stranger because of his "inferior disposition". A sudden restoration was out of the question. Understanding his son's mindset, the father set him free and that he be hired as a scavenger. Although filled with compassion, the father could not reveal his identity until the son deserved his proper place in the family.

He met his son in disguise and encouraged him to be honest in his work in order to be promoted. He promised to increase his salary and provide for his basic needs. The son had first to prove high qualities before being accepted back into the family. So he lived for 20 years in a small hut while still being employed in scavenging. The testing process would have probably continued if the father hadn't become ill, feeling his death to be imminent. Even at this time the son was not fully accepted into the family but only promoted to a higher position, that of accountant over all his father's riches. Without abandoning his sense of inferiority, the son became acquainted with all the goods. Noticing that his son's ideas had gradually changed for the good and that he despised his former status, only then did the father gather all his relatives and friends and declare the former servant to be his son and heir

## **The Teaching of the Parable in Christianity and Buddhism**

The Christian meaning of the parable is clear. All humans need to return to God in repentance and faith. He does not compel humans to do it, so it must be a personal decision. God's forgiveness is not conditioned by attaining high spiritual performances but only by repentance. Jesus Christ paid the price for our reconciliation with God through His death on the cross and His resurrection. There is nothing more to add and one life is enough to accept it.

The parable depicts the amazing availability of God to forgive and restore us, His unlimited grace to bestow upon us, His great love to accept us independently of our status and past. This should give us courage to come to Him in repentance and faith, without fear, and inherit His Kingdom, where personal communion with Him will be everlasting. \* The Buddhist parable has a different message. Both the process of being liberated (acknowledged as son) and the meaning of liberation (inheriting the father's estate) have a different meaning. One cannot simply attain liberation at once. The process is very long and demands a progressive accumulation of wisdom until one deserves his place in the hierarchy. Escaping from ignorance and suffering, attaining nirvana, and the becoming of a bodhisattva is a hard-to-win prize that has to be attained gradually by a day-by-day effort in training the mind and overcoming karma. Grace, in Buddhism, cannot be shown directly, but only as the disciple deserves it, which in fact is no grace at all. There is also a major difference from Christianity in defining the status of the liberated person. Personhood has no room in the system. Although the bodhisattva is a personal being, he acts as a temporary catalyst for the sake of other humans that they may also find nirvana. The true ultimate stage of spiritual progress is shunya, the void, where no personal communion can ever exist. It is the final blowing out of the candle. This means that an eternal communion with a Father in His Kingdom makes no sense in traditional

Buddhism. Ultimately, there is no Father to have communion with.

some basic contradictions between the two religions:

The following table summarizes the teaching of the two parables and also reveals

<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>MEANING IN CHRISTIANITY</b>	<b>MEANING IN BUDDHISM</b>
<i>The context</i>	Jesus is teaching sinners, emphasizing their need and opportunity to be reconciled with God.	Buddha is teaching spiritually advanced disciples ( <i>arhats</i> ) the need for attaining a higher position, that of a <i>bodhisattva</i> .
<i>The characters</i>	God and the sinners.	Buddha (the ultimate impersonal Buddha nature) and the ones struggling to attain it.
<i>The meaning of the son's departure from home</i>	The human attitude of rebellion against God, called sin.	Ignorance starts the wheel of karma.
<i>The son's miserable condition</i>	The human condition under the power of sin, away from personal communion with God.	Karma and reincarnation force one to wander from one physical existence to the next.
<i>The decision to return home</i>	A personal decision to leave sin, called repentance.	Karma and reincarnation lead one to the proper level where wisdom and spiritual progress can be attained.
<i>The father's attitude at the son's arrival</i>	Complete forgiveness of sin and restoration to personal fellowship with God.	Buddha's "grace" makes one progress little by little toward liberation. One has to deserve his position by a process of spiritual development.
<i>Who pays the damage for the lost fortune</i>	God, the Son incarnated as Jesus Christ, paid the price for our forgiveness through His death and resurrection.	The disciple has to "pay himself" the price for erasing his ignorance, by constantly accumulating wisdom.
<i>The son's inheritance</i>	Eternal communion with God in His kingdom.	Attaining an impersonal Ultimate Reality ( <i>shunya</i> ), where there is no room for personal communion.